New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1948

Volume IX, Number 23 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of November 15, 1948

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"Bravo"

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS — NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES — NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK SUN — NEW YORK STAR — NEW YORK POST

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"Bravo!"

The Sun

NOVEMBER 12, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE

'Bravo!' a Disappointment.

Edna Ferber and George S. Kaufman, who have given the theater valiant service as collaborators, are teamed together again, which is all to the drama's good, but their new "Bravo!" is considerably less than a satisfactory play. There is much in it that is gallant, a great deal that is touching, and quite a lot that is abrupt and awkward. Max Gordon made the presentation last night at the Lyceum.

"Bravo!" is in and out; it is up and down. It starts and stops and it never succeeds in sustaining interest that it frequently creates. Pity, too. For it's a play that speaks with a certain eloquence on timely issues, and it offers one of the season's best performances in that of Lili Darvas in the role of a one-time continental star who finds America somewhat baffling.

Miss Ferber and George Kaufman are writing in "Bravo!" of a group of refugees huddled together in a moldy and dilapidated brownstone front in New York's West Sixties. There is Lazko, the celebrated Hungarian dramatist. There is Rosa Rucker, the famous Viennese actress to whom he was never married because they just never had time. The group also includes an aging judge, who has become a candy peddler; an ex-duchess, who turns to dressmaking, and an erstwhile Hapsburg prince. He begins with a job in the Automat and he eventually marries a movie queen.

"Bravo!" seeks to show how bewildering, how unfathomable a new land can be to these Europeans driven out of a Hitlerized Europe. But as they gradually adjust themselves and work out a livelihood they come to learn that America is a country in which almost anything can happen—and practically everything does. Such as a chance meeting with Bernard Baruch when he is feeding squirrels from a bench in Central Park. There is trouble with the immigration authorities over such technicalities as illegal entry and a false affidavit, and it's the gentle and elderly and all-powerful squirrel-feeder who comes to the refugees' rescue.

Lili Darvas brings feeling and genuine believability into her characterization of the erstwhile actress. Oscar Homolka, a fluent and forceful actor, becomes somewhat monotonous in his playing as the confused and explosive dramatist. There are amusing performances from Edgar Stehli, King Calder, Zolya Talma and Jean Carson, in the role of the gaudy movie star. Christiane Grautoff is appealing as the girl the rude immigration people are trying to deport.

George Kaufman has directed the play ably, and Leo Kerz is to be credited with an excellent interior for the decaying brownstone front. Fritzi Scheff won an ovation when she came on last night in a small role, that of the type of refugee who reaches our shores with money to throw away.

"Bravo!" has gusto and some vehemence. It has some good incidental detail, but it is weak in its main story. The theater's best dramatists continue to turn in indifferent work.

'BRAVO!'

Play by Edna Ferber and George S. Kaufman; setting by Leo Kerz; costuming by Rose Bogdanoff; additional evening gowns by Castillo; staged by George S. Kaufman; presented by Max Gordon at the Lyceum Theater, Thursday evening, November 11, 1948. The cast:

Vilna Prager	Janet Fox
Rudy	Oliver Cliff
Martin Link	Edgar Stehli
Koltan Lazko	Oscar Homolka
Rosa Rucker	Lili Darvas
Lew Gilbert	Morton Havel
Jimmy Flint	Arthur Havel
Kurt Hager	Kevin McCarthy
Stephanie	Zolya Talma
Anna Zinsser	Elena Karam
Liza Kemper	Christiane Grautoff
Jeffrey Crandall	Frank Conroy
Sophie Marella	Fritzi Scheff
Wallace	King Calder
Black	George Cotton
Jane Velvet	Jean Carson

SYNOPSIS: The scene—An old brownstone house in the West Sixties, New York. Act I—December. Act II—February. Act III—April.

NEW YORK STAR

November 14, 1948

by John Lardner

Don't Bet on Writers, Either

Oscar Homolka is a fine actor, and a lot of the other performers who shared the stage with him Thursday night, when a comedy called *Bravo!* opened at the Lyceum, are pretty fair too, but my goodness, friends, what a suit for non-support all those people have got against Edna Ferber and George S. Kaufman, who set them up in housekeeping with two-tenths of a play and left them there to make it do for a whole night while they, the authors, slipped around the corner for a quick one or something.

There was once a boxing reporter (Wilbur Wood, N. Y. *Sun*) who ended all his stories with the line "Don't bet on fights." It's now advisable to add to his ruling "Don't bet on playwrights." On past form, the entry of Ferber and Kaufman would figure to go off at a price of about 2 to 5. Perhaps a professional handicapper could find the right technical phrase to explain their work with *Bravo!* Picked up weight? Didn't like track? Needed a distance? Waiting for spot? Could have used a tightener? Probably they could have used a tightener, and if *Bravo!* was it, watch this pair next out. Stable connections will bet heavily.

• • •

You could see Thursday, if you didn't know it already, that the authors had stuff. They lined up a platoon of appetizing characters, a regular *Dinner at Eight* consignment, including a playwright (said to resemble Ferenc Molnar), a young actress, a washed-up actress, a prince turned busboy, a novelist turned hack driver, a judge turned candy butcher, a ballet dancer, and a film star. Most of these, as you may have deduced, were war broken refugees from Europe, having a hell of a bad time in the hard-boiled U. S. A.

It seemed a cinch that a good play would ensue from this—a shiny, sentimental, surface-picking play, maybe, such as Miss Ferber and Mr. Kaufman usually confect when they get together, but a red-hot entertainment. But the authors just didn't do anything about these promising people. As I said, they left them there to shift for themselves, and there were times when I suspected that the actors had met the emergency by making up their lines as they went along. Come to think of it, that very possibility was mentioned by the stage playwright (Mr. Homolka) somewhere around the middle of the play. In retrospect, his remark had a damned sinister ring.

• • •

There is a time when one character in *Bravo* says of another, who is trying to make a disillusioned buck as a waitress, "She's serving soup to nuts." I can't advance this, mind you, as a representative sample of the play's wit, but it's in there, all right. It's in there.

Then there is a lady in the play, a ballet dancer and a rat at heart, who is referred to as "the girl with the stiletto." That, I think, is a hint of what Miss Ferber and Mr. Kaufman meant to provide in this piece. If they'd been hustling, the lady's lines would indeed have been stiletto-like. But, in point of fact, they have a good deal more resemblance to a broken potato-masher; there isn't a ghost of a case against her under the Sullivan Act.

In the last scene, it turns out that the hero of *Bravo!* is Bernard Baruch, who talks to the Lyceum by telephone but prudently keeps out of sight. I was surprised that Miss Ferber and Mr. Kaufman should borrow this statesman from his official biographer, Billy Rose. But maybe they didn't. Maybe Rose ghost-wrote the play. It would explain quite a lot.

Fritzi Scheff, the great Fritzi Scheff of *Kiss Me Again*, appears briefly in *Bravo!*, and I can't think of anything to say about that except that mention of the lady always reminds me of a line from an old ballad by F.P.A., entitled "Don't Tell Me What You Dreamed Last Night, For I've Been Reading Freud." The line is: "Last night I dreamed that Fritzi Scheff pursued me with a knife." It has absolutely nothing to do with the play we are talking about. Very likely Miss Ferber and Mr. Kaufman wish they could say the same for themselves.

Herald Tribune NEW YORK

NOVEMBER 12, 1948

By HOWARD BARNES

Not Much Chance to Cheer

EDNA FERBER and George S. Kaufman have created some captivating characters in "Bravo!" and set them talking. This they do through three long and somewhat languid acts at the Lyceum Theater. Oscar Homolka and a hand-picked company realize the full flavor of wise and witty lines in a determined conversation piece. They even stir occasional emotional depths as celebrated refugees from mittel-Europa cope with the new world from an old brownstone house in the West Sixties. Unfortunately, there is so little of dramatic consequence in the proceedings that when a small predicament arises, the authors desperately haul in Bernard M. Baruch, telephonically, as a deus ex machina.

* * *

The park bench statesman must have been somewhat astonished to find himself substituted for the United States Marines, the cavalry or the Lone Ranger. Suffice it to say that his assurances at the other end of a wire make for a joyous little finish to a play which has barely started. For most of the time Homolka, playing a self-exiled Hungarian dramatist, and Lili Darvas, in the part of his actress-consort, recollect theatrical triumphs in Budapest and Vienna. Their companions number a prince, an archduchess, a lady chemist, a novelist turned hack driver, a judge and a great actor's talented daughter. When Homolka and Miss Darvas take breathing spells, they carry on the nostalgic musings or describe their advantageous compacts with an outrageous destiny. The appearance of a tough cinema queen who hailed originally from Altoona, is a welcome relief in the static stanzas of "Bravo!"

* * *

Jean Carson plays the glamor girl with a brassy vigor which makes one wish that she had more to do with the work than extricate the prince from his lowly job in an Automat. Fritzi Scheff has a lively interlude, too, as she brings her veteran skill to the role of a refugee who has fled her homeland with lots of loot. Although both actresses have nothing more than bits, they achieve splashes of color in a show which has little enough of it. Miss Ferber and Kaufman have not bestirred themselves as they did in "The Royal Family." In "Bravo!" they have composed agreeable dialogue and scattered it more or less at random through a show which never builds up any satisfying momentum.

* * *

Homolka is generally assured in the leading part. He is adept at getting a wry twist into a portrayal and he employs the trick effectively in much of the piece, whether he is complaining about the lack of drama in a courtroom where he has tried to get his naturalization papers, or is contemplating suicide. Miss Darvas is serenely striking as the actress who finally marries him and Frank Conroy has a couple of brief entrances and exits as a producer. Then there are Zoyla Talma, playing the archduchess ably, Elena Karam as the lovely and frightened young actress, Kevin McCarthy, Oliver Cliff and Edgar Stehli. They walk and talk professionally against Leo Kerz's appropriate setting. The trouble is that their words and gestures add up to very little of theatrical excitement or interest.

The New York Times

NOVEMBER 12, 1948

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Edna Ferber and George S. Kaufman wear their hearts in the right place, "Bravo!" which was acted at the Lyceum last evening, is warm and sympathetic. With the assistance of Oscar Homolka and Lili Darvas, they have written a drama about the poignant plight of some Eastern Europeans in New York. The refugees include a celebrated Continental playwright, fashioned after a recognizable model; his wife, who is a celebrated actress, and a number of other famous Europeans, now living in what are politely known as reduced circumstances.

All things considered, this is one of the most vital subjects of our time, laden with all sorts of human qualities from tragic to comic and from gallant to pathetic. "Bravo!" is basically the story of how two wonderfully accomplished European theatre people try to establish themselves in New York as solvent American citizens, despite the frightful barrier of a new language and the bewilderment of new values. In a slatternly house in the Sixties a number of similar refugees have found an uneasy haven, and are finding work as candy venders, dress saleswomen, waitresses and taxi drivers.

* * *

Having considerable respect for those civilized victims of a great cultural disaster, Miss Ferber and Mr. Kaufman have written a number of rueful scenes that are haunted by wistful memories of a Europe that is gone and blocked by the impatient realities of America. And they have caught in other scenes the joyousness of hopes that America can help to fulfill. But with the greatest good will in the world it is impossible not to conclude that "Bravo!" skips quickly over the surface of a subject that needs greater insight and profounder convictions. It is an uneven show; it needs something much deeper than a series of sad and gypsy scenes pieced together in the form of a three-act play.

Obviously, Miss Darvas knows more about it than any of us. She has been through it—is still going through it, no doubt. Cast as a displaced star actress, she gives a very moving performance that puts all the emotional values into their right places. She knows the loneliness and the desperation, and being a person of spirit, she also knows how to infuse gaiety into the whole portrait. Without being sentimental, her acting is tender and glowing and the finest item of the evening.

* * *

Mr. Homolka is an overpowering actor with a great many sharply-outlined mannerisms and a loud and querulous voice. Cast in the part of the refugee playwright, he dominates the performance with a character cabinet portrait that may be ironically described as distracting. Kevin McCarthy gives a straightforward American performance as a refugee taxi-driver—an excellent performance, too, not to be elusive about it. And there is some authentic American poison in Janet Fox's acting of a lethal Polish dancer.

Christiane Grautoff, as the overwrought graduate of a concentration camp; Edgar Stehli, as an European barrister without an American portfolio; Frank Conroy, as a gold-plated theatre producer; Jean Carson, as a predatory Hollywood star and Oliver Cliff, as a penniless prince—all give interesting performances. And Fritzi Scheff tosses in an energetic scene as a lucky European snob.

In designing the single setting Leo Kerz has had the courage to make a morose and cluttered living room look morose and cluttered. Having written half the play, Mr. Kaufman has directed the whole of it expertly. Although "Bravo!" recognizes the many tangible and intangible problems of the refugees it is portraying, it does not get much beyond recognition. You do not really know much about them when the final curtain comes down.

New York Post

NOVEMBER 12, 1948

A Play About Refugees That Somehow Misses

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

The old masters are having a hard time of it in the theatre this season. Last night at the Lyceum, George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber, whose past collaborations have brought much happiness to playgoers, added to the evidence of the stage's elusiveness for its veteran writers when their new comedy called "Bravo!" proved to be, for all their ingenuity and skill, another of the year's disappointments. A sentimental chronicle of the joys and sorrows of refugee artists from Central Europe striving for a new life in alien New York, their latest work has incidental gayety, nostalgia and charm, but rarely comes to complete life.

Their central character, elaborately and, on the whole, entertainingly played by Oscar Homolka, is a famous playwright from the Danube, who perhaps bears certain resemblances to the eminent Ferenc Molnar. They call him Zoltan Lazko and they show him residing, grumblingly and with many a sigh for the great days in Vienna and Budapest, in a brownstone house in the west sixties. Surrounding him, with some of the whimsical frenzy of the celebrated family in "You Can't Take It With You," are his old sweetheart who was a noted actress, a prince who works in the automat, a countess turned dressmaker, and other amiable European fauna.

The home life of the refugees is studied with both humor and sympathy, and most of the inmates are properly engaging. Their nostalgia for the good old days, their bewilderment at the strange new world about them, and their various efforts at adjustment are contemplated with understanding and good nature, and the authors frequently succeed in drawing a touching picture of their plight. There is no denying that some of the incidents depicted are delightful. The trouble is that they are strung together so loosely and the plot structure is so insufficient that the final result is oddly dissatisfying.

It is, I am afraid, proof of the curiously inadequate quality of the narrative that Mr. Kaufman and Miss Ferber have to pull poor old Bernard Baruch off of his park bench to arrange a happy ending. Among Mr. Baruch's

great virtues as a citizen there hardly exists the proper equipment of a theatrical deus ex machina, and the use of his name to save the ingenue in the third act seems less a brilliant stroke of ingenuity than evidence that the playwrights were in a jam. The plot weaknesses would not be troublesome if the fun and bittersweet sadness were enough to make up for it, but they aren't quite that good.

If, despite the attractive incidental details, the playwright and his little group do not achieve sufficient dramatic life, it is certainly not the fault of the acting nor of Mr. Kaufman's characteristically shrewd direction. Despite what is perhaps an excess of mannerisms, Mr. Homolka is an interesting and engaging actor, and his portrait of the exiled playwright, who finds that America represents a problem, is an attractive one. Lily Darvas is excellent as his actress sweetheart, and there is a straightforward and honestly touching performance as a girl refugee by Christiane Grautoff, an interesting newcomer.

The smaller roles are likewise well handled. Jean Carson has a good comic scene as a Hollywood actress, King Calder is particularly effective as a relentless immigration officer, Oliver Cliff is engaging as a Hapsburg refugee who marries the film star, Frank Conroy is believable as a producer, and Edgar Stehli, as always, is fine as a Viennese judge reduced to street peddling. The others are helpful, and so is Leo Kerz' set. "Bravo!" always seems on the verge of becoming a warm and nourishing comedy of sentiment and irony, but somehow the final touch that would have provided the glow of dramatic well-being eludes it.

Daily Mirror

NOVEMBER 12, 1948

Ferber-Kaufman 'Bravo!' Fails to Elicit Bravoes

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Edna Ferber and George S. Kaufman started out with the material for a wonderful play when they sat down to write "Bravo!" But they weren't able to jell it into a click script. Max Gordon has given the new arrival at the Lyceum Theatre a slick production, but that isn't quite enough to atone for the Ferber and Kaufman dramaturgic mistakes.

The Ferber-Kaufman team has created a lot of fascinating characters—too many, in fact. They get in one another's way, and never quite develop into the living, breathing, entirely credible folk they should be.

"Bravo!" has to do with the trials and tribulations of a host of refugees quartered in an old brownstone house in the West Sixties, and more than a little baffled by the ways of this strange, though hospitable land. They range from a distinguished Hungarian playwright through princes and grand duchesses to talented actresses. There are enough gifted people in the house to write and act the plays, run the law courts and scientific laboratories of a small country.

Only in the last act does the clever Kaufman touch for comedy begin to assert itself insistently, and by then it is a little too late. The weaknesses of the script are demonstrated by the fact that minor characters—a couple of Tin Pan Alley whizzes, a brassy blonde screen star and a wealthy, selfish refugee—spark the only really hilarious moments of the evening. They are played to the hilt by Morton and Arthur Havel, Jean Carson and Fritzi Scheff respectively.

Oscar Homolka and Lili Darvas are excellent as the frustrated playwright and star from Hungary, whenever given anything resembling a decent opportunity. And there are helpful contributions by Oliver Cliff, Edgar Stehli, Kevin McCarthy, Zolya Talma, Elena Karam, Christiane Grautoff, Frank Conroy, Janet Fox and King Calder.

Co-author Kaufman did all right by the direction, though what the play really needed was the ministrations of that usually reliable play-doctor—Kaufman.

The characters in "Bravo!," used more skillfully, could have been fashioned into another delightful success like the memorable "You Can't Take It With You." But unfortunately they encountered the team of Ferber and Kaufman in an off moment.

We went to the Lyceum hoping to be able to shout "Bravo!" loudly and often, but had no occasion to do so during the evening.

DAILY NEWS

NOVEMBER 12, 1948

Another Theatre Drama, 'Bravo!' Not Up to Kaufman-Ferber Mark

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Two noted co-dramatists, Edna Ferber and George S. Kaufman, have pooled their talents and opinions once again in a drama titled "Bravo!" of which Max Gordon made a stylish production last evening at the Lyceum Theatre. It is a play about the theatre—the bygone theatre of a simpler and perhaps happier time—and in it I detect a state of alarm in the minds of the authors. It is as though they, as well as the characters in their play, were on the defensive in a present-day stage world of which they disapprove and which frightens them a little.

"Bravo!" has the considerable charm of two good performances by Oscar Homolka and Lily Darvas, but it is not up to the Kaufman-Ferber mark. It is a schnitzel with a sparse garnishment of sharp talk. Its hero seems to be Bernard M. Baruch, but since Mr. Baruch doesn't appear on the stage he isn't very exciting.

Another "Town House"

The drama is mainly about a Hungarian playwright and his mistress, a Hungarian actress, who once were the toasts of at least one continent. Now they are in America, living precariously with various other displaced persons in a brownstone house in New York's West Sixties. The actress can find no work and the dramatist can't write plays to suit anybody.

This brownstone house is curiously like the town house of Mr. Gordon's other production this season, "Town House." It is inhabited by a cross-section of talents, all of them Hungarians who have come to this country for refuge and all of whom have a sad and desperate time of it for a while. One, a would-be novelist, is a taxi driver. Another, a prince, is just a hall-room boy until he is captured in marriage by a broadly caricatured screen star. Several of them are bedeviled by U. S. immigration authorities until Bernard M. Baruch comes to the rescue on the telephone.

"Bravo!" ends on two notes of hope. One, expressed by some of the harried Hungarians, is that the U. S. is a great country after all. The other, expressed by Kaufman and Ferber, is that the tide in drama is about to turn and once again there will be room on the stage for romance and luxury instead of such sexless and pointless affairs as "Mister Roberts."

Homolka Good, as Usual.

I'm perfectly willing to go along with Kaufman and Ferber in this hope—but they didn't persuade me very strongly last evening. I felt that their play was not well contrived.

In the role of the once-famous dramatist, Mr. Homolka again presents one of his fine, careful and humorous characterizations. I have never failed to enjoy him in anything. Miss Darvas brings dignity and beauty to the part of the formerly admired star, and there is other pleasant work by Frank Conroy, Janet Fox, Oliver Cliff and Christiane Grautoff.

Fritzi Scheff has an admirable moment, playing a rich and therefore particularly annoying refugee, and Jean Carson goes strictly for laughs—and gets them—as a ripe Hollywood tomato who has captured a real live prince.

By now you may be puzzled at references to Baruch. So am I. It seems that Mr. Homolka is out in the park one day feeding squirrels and he gets talking with a man on a bench and the man gives him his telephone number. So when Mr. Homolka is about to be deported he calls this man and he gets help quicker than John Ford can cast a cavalry outfit to beat off the redskins.